

Bruce's Excellent Adventures Exploring the World of Montgomery: A Tour of Montgomery County's Five Sister Cities 2010-2019: Morazán, El Salvador; Gondar, Ethiopia; Xi'an, China; Hyderabad, India; and Daejeon, South Korea



MONTGOMERY
Sister Cities

REPORT TO THE COMMUNITY 2009-2018



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Community Partnerships
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Bethesda, Maryland**

When my friend Ike Leggett was elected Montgomery County Executive in November of 2006, he asked me first to help with his transition and then to create an Office of Community Partnerships to help ensure that Montgomery County is open to all of our residents and to strengthen ties to ethnic communities and nonprofit and faith based organizations with a goal of become America's most welcoming community.

Montgomery County has become a talent magnet for people from around the world. More than one-third of our one million people were born in other countries. If you include their dependent children born here, Montgomery County's immigrant population exceeds 40% of our total population. Understanding every culture and speaking nearly every language is Montgomery County's strongest asset in the global marketplace of the 21st century.

Realizing the importance of the county government being culturally competent and in touch with our extraordinary immigrant population as well as envisioning possible economic development partnerships, County Executive Leggett asked me to create a Sister City program.

What a great idea, I thought. I knew Rockville had had a Sister City in Germany for more than five decades, but I didn't know much more. We are a county. Do counties have Sister Cities? If we have to pick just one, won't we make more enemies than friends? Whose Sister City is it? The County Executive's? The county government's? The public's?

Sister Cities International had all the answers. Yes, counties have Sister Cities. And, no, you don't have to pick just one and make everyone else mad. Our neighbor Arlington has five. The State of Maryland has 21. And the relationships are not politician to politician or even government to government. The goal is to establish long term and sustainable people-to-people relationships.

We created a community nonprofit called Montgomery Sister Cities as our partner, recruited a board, and reached out to the community to see who wanted to step up and help us build a Sister Cities program. We were clear that the county government was not going to devote many taxpayer dollars to this. If it was to succeed, community members needed to step up. Our founding board chair was former Indianapolis Mayor and Congressman Bill Hudnut whose vast talents were perfect for the task.

2009

In the summer of 2009, Montgomery Sister Cities hosted a public meeting to solicit community ideas and proposals. We had an excellent turnout with people advocating for Sister Cities from many countries across the globe. The most energy came from former residents of El Salvador. This was perfect. Tiny El Salvador is the number one country of origin of Montgomery County's immigrant population. We

debated whether the Sister City should be a suburb of the capital city, but the strong view of the community was that we needed to select a Sister City in the area where the people who had come here had come from. We quickly focused on the Department of Morazán, a central battleground in the civil war of the 1980s in the eastern and more rural part of the country. This is where the war was fought and from where so many fled to the Washington region. A Department is more like a state, but the cities in Morazán are tiny. A state was the best fit.

2010



*Arriving at International Airport
in San Salvador, El Salvador
August 7, 2010*

Having never had a Sister City, we decided to send an advance group to Morazán to test the waters and see if a Sister City seemed viable. The lead advocate for Morazán was Evelyn Gonzalez, and she made sure we would be impressed. Here she is greeting us at the airport in San Salvador after spending weeks making sure our exploration would be a success. And it was. We agreed that County Executive Leggett would lead a delegation to Morazán in July of 2011.



*Memorial to Saint Óscar
Arnulfo Romero,
Metropolitan Cathedral
of San Salvador, San
Salvador, El Salvador,
November 10, 2015*

In addition to being captivated by the beauty of the country and the friendliness of the people, I was moved by learning the history of the struggle. A bloody civil war raged between 1979 and 1992 when Peace Accords were signed. The military-led government supported by the United States and death squads reigned terror on civilians for more than a decade.

The hero of the tragic period of the civil was the Archbishop of San Salvador who pleaded with President Carter to suspend U.S. support of the Salvadoran government and who was shot and killed in 1980 the day after he called on government soldiers to obey God's higher calling and stop the killing. Pope Francis canonized Archbishop Romero as a Saint in October of 2018. His memorial is in the Metropolitan Cathedral of San Salvador.



*Host Family Visiting Washington, D.C.
November 29, 2015*

As we were on a limited budget paying all of our own costs and wanting to get to know the community, Evelyn arranged for host families for each of us. I was blessed to be paired with the Diaz family, and they could not have been better hosts. Here we are when they came to visit Washington in November of 2015.

2011



*Signing First Sister Cities Agreement:
San Francisco Gotera, Department of
Morazán, El Salvador July 26, 2011*

Morazán Governor Miguel Ventura and County Executive Leggett signed copies of Montgomery County's first Sister City agreement in a packed auditorium, including 60 who had traveled from Montgomery County, on July 26, 2011 in the city of San Francisco Gotera.

It was a festive day made more special because of our partnership with Governor Ventura, as decent and honorable a person as I have ever met. I once asked him where he was during the civil war. He said he was a priest in the mountains with the rebels with a backpack and a change of clothes.



*Guatajiagua, Department of
Morazán, El Salvador, July 26, 2011*

Montgomery Sister Cities board member Neftali Granados and his brother Jorge Granados hosted the delegation in their home town of Guatajiagua, showing us improvement projects and meeting with the mayor.



*Guatajiagua, Department of Morazán,
El Salvador, July 26, 2011*

Catherine and Ike Leggett met with indigenous Lenca people who have retained many of their traditions from before the appearance of significant European influences on the American continent.



*Joateca, Department of Morazán,
El Salvador, July 27, 2011*

Neftali Benetiz took us to his home town of Joateca to participate in the inauguration of the town square.



*El Mozote Massacre Monument, El
Mozote, Department of Morazán,
El Salvador, July 27, 2011*

The most moving experience of the trip was a visit to the site of the massacre in El Mozote on December 11, 1981. A special battalion of the Salvadoran armed forces trained by United States military advisors killed every man, woman, and child in the village and then set fire to the buildings. The woman who was our guide said she was only alive because she had been away from the village that day.

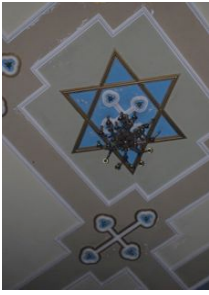


*Governor Thanking Habitat for
Humanity Metro Maryland
Volunteers, Department of Morazán,
El Salvador, July 28, 2011*

Recognizing that Montgomery County taxpayer dollars should not be used to support projects in our Sister Cities, I reached out to nonprofit groups for help. Mover Moms, Hungry for Music, and others pitched in. Habitat for Humanity Metro Maryland became the standout. All local Habitat organizations are required to take on international projects. At my request, John Paukstis committed the Metro Maryland group to focus on Morazán. On our way back to San Salvador, we visited with Habitat volunteers. That's my daughter Emily shaking hands with the Governor.

2012

When the County Executive's African Advisory Group learned about the Salvadoran Sister City, the members told me they wanted one. I told them we would likely select one city in one country in the entire continent. I wished them good luck agreeing on their choice.



Hundreds of diaspora members from nine countries competed in an open process organized by the advisory group and selected Gondar, the ancient capital of Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Students Association at Montgomery College led by Yasin Yimam carried the day. I realized Ethiopia was complicated immediately upon arrival in Addis in January of 2012. We were in the Holy Trinity Cathedral when I looked at the ceiling and saw the Star of David. I closed my eyes and heard chanting as though I was in a mosque.

*Holy Trinity Cathedral
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia,
January 19, 2012*



As in El Salvador, we sent an advance group to lay the groundwork for the County Executive's trip. One of the great advantages of Montgomery's Sister Cities program is that we have so many people here who were born and raised in our Sister Cities. Solomon Ayele helped lead us on our trip to Gondar. He took us to his school and when we visited the health clinic, we found one of his high school classmates was in charge.

*Clinic, Gondar, Ethiopia
January 23, 2012*



This is Ayanaw. He has been with us every step of the way for the seven plus years of our Sister City relationship. At least three different mayors have had Ayanaw as the point person of this partnership. In January, we met his 111 year old dad.

*Ayanaw
Gondar, Ethiopia
January 25, 2012*



This is my most indelible image of Ethiopia. These angels adorn the ceiling of the 17th century Debre Birhan Selassie Church.

*Debre Birhan Selassie Church,
Gondar, Ethiopia, January 25, 2012*



*Gondar Atse Tewodros Airport, Gondar, Ethiopia,
September 25, 2012*

In September of 2012, County Executive Leggett led a delegation of 40. Ayanaw led the festive greeting party. With flowers and scarfs.



*Royal Enclosure of Fasil Ghebbi,
Gondar, Ethiopia,
September 25, 2012*

When the Advisory Group informed me that Gondar was the choice, I turned to Dr. Google. And there it was: “The Camelot of Africa.” Did you read about castles in your history and geography text books about Africa? Emperor Fasiladas broke with the nomadic tradition of his predecessors and founded Gondar as a permanent capital of Ethiopia in 1635. The Royal Enclosure houses the remains of the palaces built by him and his successors. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1979.



*Fasiledes Preparatory School, Gondar, Ethiopia
September 26, 2012*

We visited Solomon’s school. We donated computers, books, and musical instruments during our trip.



*Meskel Ceremony (Finding of the True Cross),
Gondar, Ethiopia September 27, 2012*

We celebrated Meskel – the Finding of the True Cross – in the town square just outside the Royal Enclosure with the mayor under a blazing hot sun.



*Signing Second Sister Cities Agreement,
Gondar, Ethiopia, September 27, 2012*

On September 27, 2012, County Executive Leggett and Deputy Mayor Getinet Amare signed Montgomery County’s second Sister City agreement.



Local Entrepreneurs, Gondar, Ethiopia, September 28, 2012

I love these guys. The little guy on the right met us in front of the hotel every morning and every night. They weren't begging. They were selling gum. Did they attend school? Possibly. The schools are so crowded, the students only go for half a day. Plenty of time to learn how to be an entrepreneur.



New Cathedral of Our Lady Mary of Zion, Axum, Ethiopia September 29, 2012

Because of the extraordinarily rich religious traditions of Ethiopia, we visited Axum and Lalibela, designated UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 1980 and 1978.

Axum is one of the oldest continuously inhabited places in Africa. The story is that the original Ark of the Covenant is here, but none of us will ever know because only the guardian monk may view the Ark.



Church of Saint George, Lalibela, Ethiopia September 30, 2012

King Lalibela had visited Jerusalem and wanted to build a new Jerusalem as his capital. But instead of building churches of stone, he chose to have each church carved from a single stone during his reign from 1181 to 1221.

2013

The Sister Cities in El Salvador and Ethiopia had given us so much more than the County Executive and I had anticipated. We imagined that having Sister Cities would increase the government's cultural competence and create a sense of pride in our immigrant communities. But I had no idea what a powerful engagement tool they would prove to be.

People who had fled El Salvador and Ethiopia because of civil wars and repressive governments were not inclined to head down to city hall in their new home town. People trying to get established in a new land with all the challenges of language, culture, and employment didn't have the time to participate in Montgomery County's white collar tradition of weeknight advisory committee meetings. El

Salvador was the number one country of origin of the county's immigrant community and yet we had virtually no one from Central America on the County Executive's Latin American Advisory Group. County Executive Leggett had created the county's first African Advisory Group, but we had no one from Ethiopia, the number one country of origin of our African immigrant community. Once we established Sister Cities, we had literally hundreds of new friends in these important constituencies.

Sister Cities had proven its value for our work in Community Partnerships. Now we needed to add Economic Development as a point of focus. The next obvious targets for Sister Cities were China, India, and South Korea.



Shanghai, China, September 17, 2013

China was our first priority. Lily Qi, the former Asian liaison in my office then working on economic development for the County Executive and now one of our Delegates in Annapolis, pointed us in the direction of Xi'an. Even I knew about Xi'an, home of the Terracotta Warriors. Why I asked would China's ancient capital, a city of ten million people with more than twenty universities want to partner with Montgomery County? Well, they did. And we had a strong partner in the Northwestern Chinese American Association of Greater Washington.

When we travel, especially with an economic development focus, we visit more than just our Sister City. The opportunity to see China with the County Executive led to the largest delegation of any of our Sister City trips. We took 90 people to China in September of 2013, and we started our adventure in Shanghai.



*Fuxing Park,
Shanghai, China
September 17, 2013*

Fuxing Park laid out by the French in 1909 in the heart of Shanghai is an urban jewel. I'm not a morning person, but when I'm in Shanghai I get up early to visit the park. The parks in China are giant, outdoor senior centers with dancers, card players, tai chi everywhere.



The story is told that the first Emperor of China (roughly 200 BC) wanted to be buried with soldiers to protect him in the afterlife. One wise advisor suggested terracotta sculptures rather than real soldiers. A local farmer in 1974 led to the discovery of a Terracotta Army of 8,000.



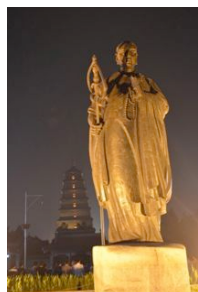
*Terracotta Warriors
Xi'an, China
September 19, 2013*

The richness of talent in Montgomery County paid off again as we were accompanied on our trip to China by Mary Kane, a Bethesda resident serving as president of Sister Cities International.



*Signing Third Sister
Cities Agreement
Xi'an, China
September 20, 2013*

Dealing with the Chinese government isn't easy. The process of gaining full status as a Sister City is time consuming. Approval from Beijing is required. County Executive Leggett and Xi'an Mayor Dong Jun exchanged gifts and signed documents at a lavish banquet on September 30, 2013 establishing a Friendship City relationship. The formal approval of a Sister Cities relationship came in August of 2014.



*Giant Wild Goose
Pagoda, Xi'an China
September 20, 2013*

One problem for me with the economic development oriented trips we have taken is that we need to get the County Executive to multiple cities reducing the time we spend in our Sister City. I'm a walker and a history buff, and I've been to Xi'an twice. I regret to say I have yet to walk on the 640 year old city wall, the most complete ancient city wall in China. But I did get to visit the famed Giant Wild Goose Pagoda built in 652 and shown in the background of this photo.



*Forbidden City, Beijing,
China, September 21, 2013*

I enjoy visiting Shanghai much more than Beijing, but when you are taking people to China for the first and possibly only time in their lives you must go to Beijing. The top stop is the Forbidden City, the imperial palace complex emperors called home from 1420 to 1912. A UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1987, the Forbidden City contains 980 buildings over 180 acres. It is the largest collection of preserved ancient wooden structures in the world.



*Exploring Hutongs,
Beijing, China,
September 21, 2013*

The Hutongs of Beijing are narrow alleys lined by courtyard residences. Many have been destroyed for roads and new buildings, but enough have been saved to give you an opportunity to travel back in time to a whole other world. Don't go to Beijing and not visit the Hutongs.



*Great Wall of China
Near Beijing, China,
September 22, 2013*

And speaking of once in a lifetime can't miss, there is the Great Wall of China. The Badaling Great Wall, 50 miles northwest of Beijing, is the best-preserved and most complete section of the wall built during the Ming Dynasty (1368 - 1644) to defend Beijing against the intrusion of northern Mongolians.

2014

India and China compete with each other for second place to El Salvador as the country of origin of Montgomery's largest immigrant populations. A several months long process that included a survey of Indian community leaders led to a consensus pick of Hyderabad. With two ancient capitals among our three Sister Cities, Hyderabad was a fitting choice. I'm older than the Republic of India. If India had been a nation hundreds of years ago, Hyderabad might well have been the capital. Founded in 1591, it is known as the City of Pearls. With the country's most diverse mix of Muslims and Hindus, this city of ten million people is an economic powerhouse often referred to as Cyberabad.



The County Executive arrived in Hyderabad, India in November of 2014 with a delegation of 45.

*Arrive in Hyderabad, India
November 12, 2014*



The County Executive was not afraid to crash a planned all female photo op at one of India’s largest mosques. This mosque, completed with the labor of 8,000 workers in 1694 seventy-seven years after the foundation stone was laid, is known as Mecca Masjid as it is said that soil was brought from Mecca to make the bricks that form the mosque’s central arch. The prayer hall holds 10,000 people. The mosque lies in the heart of Hyderabad close to Charminar, the city’s most famous landmark.

*Mecca Masjid, Hyderabad,
India November 13, 2014*



We found it worth the hike to the top of the Golconda Fort with glorious views of nearby domed tombs build for 16th century kings.

*Qutb Shahi Tombs
Hyderabad, India,
November 14, 2014*



County Executive Leggett signed Montgomery County’s fourth Sister City agreement with Hyderabad Mayor Mohammed Majid Hussain on November 14, 2014. In part as a result of our trip, Infosys Public Services opened a headquarters in Rockville with a mission of driving innovation in healthcare technology.

*Signing Fourth Sister Cities
Agreement
Hyderabad, India
November 14, 2014*



*Telangana, India
November 15, 2014*



*Taj Mahal
Agra, India
November 19, 2014*



*Golden Temple
Amritsar, India
November 20, 2014*



*National Hospital, San
Francisco Gotera, Department
of Morazán, El Salvador,
November 8, 2015*

Montgomery County is such an amazing place. Our friend Shashi Shrivastav works with the Ekal Foundation to support education in rural villages. She took us to two of these villages. It remains a mystery to me how these children around the world (and I should add right here in the United States) who have so little are so positive and inspiring.

If you go to India, you gotta go to Agra to see the Taj Mahal. This jewel of Muslim architecture was commissioned in 1632 to house the tomb of an emperor's wife who had died in childbirth. Twenty thousand artisans from across India and beyond were employed. The ivory white marble mausoleum sits on a river bank and is set in a formal garden. Even a County Executive is moved to take a photo. It was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1983.

I admit I had never heard of the Golden Temple until our friend Mirin Phool insisted we go to Amritsar to see it. Honestly, I was afraid we might be wasting a day. But just months before our trip, Nicholas Kristof pronounced it one of "the world's coolest places." Good enough for me. A 1577 temple set in a lake, demolished multiple times by Muslim armies, and overlaid with gold foil in 1830, the Sikh community's holiest shrine is breathtakingly elegant. A Taj Mahal without so many tourists.

2015

While county residents from Morazán returned on a regular basis, we had not had a large mission trip there since the signing in 2011. Despite some concerns about safety, we organized a return trip in November of 2015. County Councilmember George Leventhal had been moved by our 2011 visit to the National Hospital in San Francisco Gotera. He presented the hospital with donated equipment as well as a check for \$11,000 he had raised from contributions by county residents and businesses that was used to modernize the hospital's neonatal care center.



El Barrial, Department of Morazán, El Salvador, November 8, 2015

I told you earlier that Habitat for Humanity Metro Maryland had really stepped up. Habitat built 26 houses and repaired 23 others in Morazán's El Barrial community. Ninety international volunteers participated in 15 Habitat trips over four years investing \$360,000 in this small community. And we were literally greeted by a brass band when we visited.



El Mozote Massacre Monument, El Mozote, Department of Morazán, El Salvador, November 8, 2015

In 2015, we paid our respects at the El Mozote Massacre Monument. Just look at the ages of the children who were killed.



School, Department of Morazán, El Salvador, November 9, 2015

Our delegation delivered 150 computers to local schools in Morazán that the county's Department of Technology Services had retired from county service.



University of El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador, November 9, 2015

One of the top priorities of our Morazán Sister Cities committee has been to provide educational opportunities for local students beyond high school. Progress on this initiative has been slow, but progress has been made with technical assistance from Montgomery College, regular fundraisers by the Morazán Sister Cities committee, and strong leadership from the Association for Educational Development for El Salvador. Here we are meeting at the University of El Salvador.



Legislative Assembly of El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador, November 9, 2015

We toured the Legislative Assembly of El Salvador in San Salvador.



Residence of the United States Ambassador, San Salvador, El Salvador, November 10, 2015

Luckily for us, the U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador at the time is a personal friend of County Executive Leggett from their days as White House Fellows. Mari Carmen Aponte attended the Sister City signing ceremony in Morazán in 2011 and showed off her very robust collection of Salvadoran artists when she hosted us for breakfast at the ambassador's residence in San Salvador in 2015.

2017



Seoul Incheon Airport, Seoul, South Korea, October 21, 2017

We put a hold on creating new Sister Cities for a few years in order to strengthen the ones we had. In 2017, we moved forward with the creation of a Sister City in South Korea and decided to combine a mission trip to South Korea with a return visit to Xi'an, China.

It takes a lot of effort to move groups of 40 to 90 people around the world on our Sister City trips. Here's Diane Vu in Seoul's Incheon Airport in October of 2017 making sure all our gifts will get to our partners in South Korea and China. Leading these mission trips is like herding cats. We had 90 delegates in China in 2013, 45 in India in 2014, and 42 on our 2017 trip. Diane knows how to herd cats. The good news is that County Executive Elrich has appointed Diane to take my position as director of the Office of Community Partnerships. This bodes well for the future of Montgomery Sister Cities.



*Gyeongbok Palace, Seoul, South Korea,
October 22, 2017*

Before heading to our Sister City in Daejeon, we had a chance to visit a royal palace built in 1395. Despite being just 120 miles from Pyongyang, North Korea, this kid sure seemed relaxed. We were all just a bit more on edge in October of 2017 than he was.



*Yeonjeong Korean Traditional
Music Center, Daejeon, South
Korea, October 22, 2017*

On our first night in Daejeon, we were treated to a performance by the Hanbat Korean Traditional Music Orchestra.



*Daejeon Metropolitan Office of
Education,
Daejeon, South Korea
October 22, 2017*

One of the main reasons we selected Daejeon as our Sister City was because the Daejeon Metropolitan Office of Education was already working with Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) and Montgomery College on a teacher training and teacher exchange program. Considered the Silicon Valley of South Korea with 19 universities and 500 research institutions and as an administrative arm of the national government just 90 miles south of Seoul, Daejeon was a natural pick.

Montgomery College President DeRionne Pollard and County Councilmember Craig Rice signed multiple agreements with schools and universities on behalf of the College and MCPS.



Signing Fifth Sister Cities Agreement, Daejeon, South Korea, October 23, 2017

After the signing of our fifth Sister Cities agreement with Daejeon Mayor Kwon Sun-Taik on October 23, 2017, County Executive Leggett explained the gift he had commissioned for each of our Sister Cities. After we were embarrassed by the extraordinary miniature replica terracotta horse drawn carriage given to the County Executive in Xi'an in 2013, we realized we needed to step up our game. We commissioned renowned silkscreen gifting artist Joseph Craig English from Washington Grove to produce a suitable gift. The County Executive is really proud of this print and always takes the time to explain that the faces from the Montgomery Youth Orchestra represent Montgomery County's valued diversity. An orchestra represents his approach to governing that recognizes that we are better working together. Strathmore in the background represents Montgomery County's commitment to excellence. Note the translator at the ready. Lean in, indeed.



Gongsanseong Fortress, South Korea, October 24, 2017

During our Sister City trips, we often split into separate groups allowing people to explore priority interests of economic development, education, health, or history. Some of our group visited a royal palace built in the fifth century that deftly utilized the natural topography for defensive purposes. And the County Executive led a group to pay respects at the Daejeon National Cemetery.



Hanbat National University, Daejeon, South Korea October 24, 2017

In addition to continued strong support from Montgomery College, we were pleased to be joined on this trip by the leadership of our new Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation (MCEDC), a 2016 initiative of County Executive Leggett to privatize the county's economic development work. MCEDC organized business forums in South Korea and China including one at Hanbat National University in Daejeon.



Xi'an, China, October 25, 2017

We only had a couple of days in Xi'an, but we really wanted to visit with the new mayor Shangguan Jiqing, who treated us to perhaps the most amazing banquet I have ever attended. Check out the table decorations.



Xi'an Hospital of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Xi'an, China, October 26, 2017

I try to keep to my role as our photographer, but when we visited Xi'an's Hospital of Traditional Chinese Medicine, I made an exception. After decades with a bad back, some preventative medicine sounded like a good idea. I have done the exercise this doctor taught me virtually every morning and night for the last 16 months.



Xi'an Hospital of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Xi'an, China, October 26, 2017

The staff at the hospital practice what they preach.



Terracotta Warriors, Xi'an, China, October 26, 2017

Here is our Montgomery College President demonstrating her leadership skills during our visit to the Terracotta Warriors.



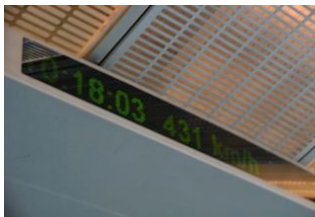
Shanghai Metro, Shanghai, China, October 27, 2017

I know I'm sounding like a broken record, but it really is a plus to travel with a group from Montgomery County. Mike Goldman, Montgomery's representative on the METRO board, was on the trip. I got to tag along on his tour of the Shanghai Metro. China builds the equivalent of a Purple Line about every year in many different cities. China's enormous infrastructure investments at home and all throughout Africa and elsewhere may leave us in the dust. While recognizing the fact that their system allows them to violate all the rules of democratic process, it is worth learning how they are able to build what they build.



Not all traffic solutions in Shanghai are state of the art.

Traffic, Shanghai, China, October 27, 2017



Shanghai Maglev Train, Shanghai, China October 27, 2017

But the Maglev train to the airport in Shanghai at 268 miles per hour certainly is.

2019



National Museum of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, January 17, 2019

Despite significant interest from the Gondar Sister City committee, we had not been able to return to Ethiopia since the 2012 signing. A trip planned for 2016 was derailed by safety concerns. In January of 2019, we were able to return with a group of 19 led by County Councilmember Craig Rice. The first two things we always do when we fly into Addis Ababa is to go to the United State Embassy for a briefing and to visit Lucy. Truth be told, Lucy is seldom on display. She's getting up there in age. Lucy is about 3.2 million years old. Home for Lucy -- apparently the anthropologists were Beatles' fans -- is the National Museum of Ethiopia in Addis. While there are modern challenges to the theory that we are all Ethiopians, the Rift Valley of Ethiopia has long been called the cradle of mankind because of Lucy.



*Yod Abyssinia Cultural
Restaurant
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, January 17, 2019*

The best way to jump right into Ethiopian culture is to visit the Yod Abyssinia Cultural Restaurant in Addis. Despite not having slept for more than 24 hours, that's where we spent our first evening.



*Yod Abyssinia Cultural
Restaurant, Addis Ababa
Ethiopia, January 17, 2019*

If you haven't seen Ethiopian shoulder dancing, don't wait until you go to Ethiopia. Spend an evening in Silver Spring.

Our great friend Ayanaw who has been with us every step of the way for the last seven years greeted us at the airport. We were especially looking forward to meeting the brand new mayor, Dr. Muluken Adane. Almost immediately, he reminded me of Morazán Governor Miguel Ventura. The first thing you notice about both men is their modesty and decency. And both of these servant leaders came to their political positions from non-political backgrounds – Ventura from the priesthood, Adane from the university.



*Goha Hotel, Gondar,
Ethiopia, January 18, 2019*

Our delegation was warmly received by the mayor and his colleagues from city government at a welcoming dinner at the beautiful Goha Hotel. Our hosts returned the favor of the Montgomery County artwork we had presented to them with an original painting showcasing the historic city and Emperor Tewodros who has come to symbolize Ethiopian unity and identity.



Timkat (Epiphany) at Fasiladas' Bath, Gondar, Ethiopia, January 19, 2019

The dates of our trips to Ethiopia are always governed by our desire to take part in the major religious celebrations of Timkat in January and Meskel in September. Timkat is particularly challenging... BUT rewarding. We woke up at 2 a.m. (this after 30 hours without sleep just a day before) to get a seat at 3 a.m. Even the mayor was there by 4 a.m. to join us in the front row of temporary stands made of the same ubiquitous eucalyptus trees used as scaffolding on construction sites throughout Ethiopia. May I share with you they are not fun to sit on? Especially for seven straight hours.



Timkat (Epiphany) at Fasiladas' Bath, Gondar, Ethiopia, January 19, 2019

The Timkat ceremony celebrates the Baptism of Jesus. It starts at 7 a.m. Yes, there is a lot of hurry up and wait in these Sister City trips. But we realized we were about to participate in something special... something that has been done at this very spot since the middle of the 17th century. Think about that. The Americas were just beginning to be colonized by the Europeans. The Baths built by Emperor Fasiladas are only filled with water for this ceremony.



Timkat (Epiphany) at Fasiladas' Bath, Gondar, Ethiopia January 19, 2019

After a magnificent, ornate ceremony where the most senior priest carries a model of the Ark of the Covenant, the water is blessed.



Timkat (Epiphany) at Fasiladas' Bath Gondar, Ethiopia January 19, 2019

The most exciting moment comes around two-and-one-half hours into the ceremony when the pilgrims jump into the water to re-enact the baptism of Jesus believing they will be purified.



*Jemi-Al Kebir Masjid
Gondar, Ethiopia
January 20, 2019*

Ethiopian Orthodox Christians are the largest faith group in the country. Nearly one-third of the population is Muslim. In Gondar, 85% are Orthodox Christians and just 12% Muslim. As we had in the past, we visited a major mosque in Gondar.



*Jewish Community Center
Gondar, Ethiopia
January 20, 2019*

The story of the Ethiopian Jews would take the rest of the morning to tell. Jews have been in Ethiopia for more than 2,000 years. As I have pointed out before, the other religions have adopted various Judaic practices. Christian emperors wore the Star of David on their crown. The number of Jews has decreased dramatically as many have moved to Israel. The majority of Jews left in Ethiopia live in Gondar. We visited the Jewish Community Center where prayer sessions are held three times a day.



*Abiot Fire Elementary School
Gondar, Ethiopia
January 21, 2019*

We were greeted by the students of the two elementary schools we visited. We donated computers and school supplies. We also brought sports equipment and medical supplies for the health clinic. We were prepared to plant a tree in honor of County Executive Leggett in a park to be dedicated to the Montgomery-Gondar Sister City relationship, but learned it would not be prudent to plant in the dry season. We hope to see the tree and the plaque we brought when we return next January.



*Felege Abiot Elementary School
Gondar, Ethiopia
January 21, 2019*

The Gondar elementary students are taught about the Rule of Law. Our group agreed this is a pretty impressive list.

As I have mentioned before, Montgomery College has been a great Sister Cities partner. Our delegation in January included four representatives of the College who were there to strengthen their partnership with Gondar University.



*University of
Gondar MLK Day Celebration
Gondar, Ethiopia
January 21, 2019*

We had suggested to our hosts at the city and the University of Gondar that since we were missing our local Martin Luther King Day celebration that we might have one in Gondar. They rose to the challenge. The highlight was a riveting play featuring MLK and Emperor Tewodros. Riveting despite the fact that only a few of us understand Amharic. We all decided we need to return for a second annual MLK Day celebration in Gondar in 2020.



*Simien Mountains National
Park
Northern Ethiopia
January 22, 2019*

The mayor insisted that we must visit the Simien Mountains National Park and provided the van to take us on the two-and-one-half hour journey north. He was right. The volcanic eruptions of 30 million years ago created extraordinarily beautiful views across valleys and plateaus. We were most taken by the baboon-like Gelada that were so busy digging up roots in the dry season that they paid us little mind even though we were absolutely fascinated by them. This is another of the UNESCO World Heritage Sites we have visited in Ethiopia.



*Bahir Dar Stadium
Bahir Dar, Ethiopia
January 23, 2019*

A three hour drive south of Gondar lies Bahir Dar. We were disappointed not to see the Falls that mark the beginning of the Blue Nile at Lake Tana as had been advertised, but it did give me a chance to sneak away from the group to see Gondar surprise the favored Bahir Dar and gain a nil-nil draw in a football match before about 40,000 fans, many of whom had made the long trip from Gondar.



*Ura Kidane Mehret Church
Lake Tana, Ethiopia
January 24, 2019*

The next morning, we took an hour's boat ride across Lake Tana and after a twenty minute walk up a hill we reached the monastery. The entire route was lined with crafts people but not in a way that felt pushy or tacky. The crafts were first rate and not overpriced. At the church, spectacular murals painted between 100 and 250 years ago tell the story of Christ.



*Red Terror Martyrs Memorial Museum
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, January 25, 2019*

Before I left, I found a note from Rev. Mark Greiner of Takoma Park Presbyterian that it was really important to visit the Red Terror Martyrs Memorial Museum in Addis. I was a bit uncertain about whether the entire group should go so just my wife Peggy and I went to check it out. We will go there in future trips. I had been uncomfortable all week that we had not spent any time understanding the trauma Ethiopians have lived through in recent decades, the trauma that led so many to flee their country and come to Montgomery County. Both of our friends Ayanaw and Solomon are of the age that they had been arrested and tortured and thrown in jail for the crime of being teenage boys. I believe people need to know this story.



*Red Terror Martyrs
Memorial Museum
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia,
January 25, 2019*

There is a statue of three women out front of the museum saying NEVER EVER AGAIN in all capital letters. The museum documents the horrors since Haile Selassie was deposed in 1974. I noticed a sign that the museum opened in 2010. My head was throbbing with confusion when we caught up with our group at the university in Addis. A Montgomery County resident making his first return visit to Addis since his days as a student activist in 2012 joined us. I pulled him aside and told him I had just visited a museum that was dedicated to never ever returning to repressive government that had been built by a repressive government. He just smiled and said that was “the paradox of Ethiopia.”

This is after all, an ancient kingdom that has sustained a great and rich civilization without foreign colonization but that remains stuck in an agrarian economy. A country where the major religion has adopted elements of other faiths. If you are not confused by what you see in Ethiopia, you simply aren't paying attention. I need to go back next year and try harder to figure some of this out. You are most welcome to join us.